

Singapore and the United States: Cooperation on Transnational Security Threats

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Introduction

Singapore is Washington's closest security partner in Southeast Asia. In assessing the cooperation between the two countries on transnational security threats, this paper presents optimistic findings. The paper is divided into three sections. First, it discusses the security concerns and priorities in Singapore since September 2001, and evaluates how well they align with U.S. priorities, taking into account key aspects of bilateral cooperation to date. The second section addresses the question of what can be done to enhance security and defense cooperation between the two countries, including regional counter-terrorism and maritime security issues. The final section concludes by placing the analysis in a broader Southeast Asian context.

I. Singapore's Security Priorities

Threat perceptions

On the security front, there are two items currently at the top of Singapore's agenda. Over the short- to medium-term, terrorism dominates the Singaporean policy-maker's threat perception; while over the medium- to long-term, he worries about the implications of China's steady growth on regional stability and security.

In Singapore, where there has always been some sensitivity about describing China as a "threat," the policy elite has been the region's primary proponent of economic and political engagement with China since the 1990s. This strategy to "manage" China's rise with minimal disruption to regional peace and stability rests on the conviction that the integration of China into the regional and international economy and society will help it to prosper and develop a stake in the rules of the game, thus socializing Beijing into becoming a status quo power (Khong 1999: 110; Johnston 2003). Growing Chinese power remains a cause for long-term concern, but there is now less worry about a potential direct or indirect threat. Singapore's leaders appear to be cautiously satisfied at the perceived success of engagement strategies, as seen in Beijing's cooperation with ASEAN, the commitment to a China-ASEAN free trade agreement, and China's participation in wider regional institutions such as the ARF and ASEAN+3 (Storey 2002; Goh 2005).

The change in leadership when Lee Hsien Loong took over as prime minister in August 2004 is unlikely to engender significant alterations in Singapore's approach of

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active engagement toward China. This younger generation of leaders, however, appears to be more pessimistic about China. High-ranking members of the new leadership are convinced that a more prosperous China will probably also be a more muscular one. They acknowledge, too, that Beijing will have its way in Southeast Asia eventually—as Chinese economic power grows, this will inevitably translate into greater influence and better ability to constrain policy preferences in the region.¹ Lee experienced an early demonstration of Chinese influence when he made an unofficial visit to Taiwan just before he took over the reins of power. Beijing’s loud condemnation of the visit and its cancellation of various official exchanges caused Singapore’s prime minister to issue a clear public statement of support for China in the event of a unilateral Taiwanese declaration of independence.²

Yet Singapore’s leaders may feel they have some room to maneuver with China. Insofar as a China “threat” exists for Singapore, it tends to take the form of potential disruptions to regional stability and economic development as well as potential constraints posed by China on the Singapore government’s political choices on the issue of Taiwan. Singapore has no territorial disputes with China, and its relative geographical distance makes the rising power less urgent a consideration than for the other two countries under study here.

While China as a source of long-term regional strategic concern and short-term bilateral sensitivity is unlikely to diminish, Singapore’s threat perceptions have undergone very significant reorientation as a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Within Southeast Asia, the rise of terrorism on the international agenda may have most affected Singapore’s conception of national and regional security. Terrorism is now taken very seriously as a short- and medium-term problem—partly because of the discovery of Southeast Asian networks related to al-Qaeda, the arrest of members of the extremist Jemaah Islamiah (JI) group in Singapore in 2002, and the uncovering of plans to attack targets in Singapore. The island-state has been most active in pushing for regional cooperation in counterterrorism and, moreover, has agreed on a series of bilateral accords with the United States on container port security and policing of terrorist financing (Tan 2002).

Fundamentally, Singapore’s policymakers have been galvanized by the new terrorist threat because it appears to vindicate one of their most critical long-standing security concerns. As a small Chinese-majority state surrounded by the large Muslim-majority states of Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore has had a series of unpleasant experiences: a failed merger with Malaysia in 1963–65, followed by racial riots, as well as being caught in the middle during Indonesia’s confrontation with Malaysia for regional hegemony at about the same time. Despite improved relations with both countries, Singapore’s leaders continue to be wary of aggression from these neighbors, especially if motivated by racial or religious factors led by ultranationalist or fundamentalist Muslim governments (Huxley 2000: 43). After 9/11, therefore, Singapore officials were quick to

1. Author interview with Singapore minister, August 2003.

2. “National Day Rally 2004: Highlights of PM Lee Hsien Loong’s Speech,” *Straits Times*, August 22, 2004; “A David-and-Goliath Struggle,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 5, 2004.

identify with the threat of extremist Islam and to tap into broad concerns about the perceived trend of “political Islam” in the region. They appear to be genuinely worried about the prospect of neighboring states becoming more Islamized—both in terms of societies that are more consciously and “austerely” Islamic, often with an “anti-American tinge to their religious beliefs,” as well as in the form of radical Islamic political parties coming to power.³ This, they feel, jeopardizes Singapore’s secular identity and, in the worst instance, poses an existential threat “if our neighbours turn Islamic and attack us.” Radicalized political Islam is seen as the most “urgent and fundamental threat” to the nation because it arises “not because of what we do, but because of who we *are*.⁴

That the Singapore government now sees terrorism and political Islam as greater security priorities than the rise of China has important implications for its relationship with the United States. While it is difficult to posit causality in one direction or the other, Singapore’s concern about the fundamentalist Islamic terrorist threat clearly reinforces its long-standing leaning toward the United States in regional security matters. The new counterterrorism agenda may act as stronger glue for the Singapore-U.S. strategic partnership than the China challenge. Thus Singapore is now maneuvering toward a closer identification of common security interests with the United States than before. This is a double-hedge: first against the possibility of fundamentalist Islamic threats from within Southeast Asia; second, in the long term, against the potentially destabilizing effects of a stronger China.

The role of the U.S. in Singapore’s security strategy

The Singapore government’s regional security strategy relies explicitly on the United States because it has a positive assessment of the U.S. role in the region and a deep preference for a regional security structure guaranteed by American preponderance of power. According to ex-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, for instance, the United States is a “reassuring and stabilizing force” in Southeast Asia and the American presence a “determining reason for the peace and stability Asia enjoys today.”⁵ The U.S. security umbrella and interventions during the Cold War are seen to have allowed noncommunist Southeast Asia to develop economically, and America’s victory in the Cold War and its investment and technology are seen to be driving the new economy.⁶ For Singapore’s leaders, the United States continues to be a benign power with no territorial ambitions in the region and, moreover, a strong interest in maintaining the freedom of navigation that is vital to the region’s economic development and growth.⁷

3. Goh Chok Tong, “East Asia After Iraq,” speech to Asia Society Washington Center, Washington, DC, May 7, 2003, available at <http://www.asiasociety.org/speeches/tong03.html>.

4. Author interviews with Singapore officials, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 2004.

5. Goh Chok Tong, “ASEAN-US Relations: Challenges,” speech to the Asia Society, New York, September 7, 2000; available at <http://www.asiasociety.org/speeches/tong.html>.

6. Goh Chok Tong, keynote address to U.S.-ASEAN Business Council annual dinner, Washington, DC; reprinted in *Straits Times*, June 15, 2001.

7. Goh, “East Asia After Iraq,” p. 4.

The United States is viewed as the key strategic force in the region for two reasons: its alliance with Japan forestalls Japanese remilitarization; and its military presence deters Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Straits and South China Sea (Storey 2002: 219–30). In the context of the rise of China, while Singapore has actively engaged China it has also keenly supported and facilitated a continued American military presence in the region as a hedge against the possibility that a U.S. drawdown would lead to the vacuum being filled by Japan or China. This hedging strategy has been operationalized in a number of ways.

In November 1990, a Singapore-U.S. agreement was signed allowing American access to airbase and wharf facilities on the island. Since the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1992, Singapore has hosted a naval logistics command center and accepted the periodic deployment of U.S. fighter aircraft for exercises. A naval base, opened in 2001, was also specially built to berth U.S. aircraft carriers.

Singapore's regional security strategy entails hedging because, despite close defense cooperation with the United States, it has not assumed an alliance relationship for fear of upsetting its immediate neighbors or China. Yet this is not a strong hedge like the Thai case, for Singapore identifies much more closely with the United States than with China in strategic terms. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew referred in 1996 to a “fallback position should China not play in accordance with the rules as a good global citizen.” Lee suggested that the United States ought then to father a new alliance of Japan, Korea, ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia.⁸ Some analysts have suggested that this reflects the likely choice for Singapore if the crunch comes: it would choose the U.S. side (Khong 1999: 121).⁹ Notably, shifting strategic priorities after 9/11 have already led some Singapore policymakers to indicate that the country may be embarking on a “long-term strategic realignment” that will bring it closer to the United States.¹⁰ While still eschewing a formal alliance, Singapore is quietly cooperating with the United States more closely on key antiterrorism and antiproliferation issues, including its participation in the Container Security Initiative (CSI) and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) aimed at intercepting illegal weapons cargoes transported over sea, air, and land. The two countries are also currently negotiating a new framework agreement for a strategic cooperation partnership in defense and security, which will expand the scope of current bilateral cooperation in such areas as counterterrorism, counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, joint military exercises and training, policy dialogues, and defense technology. This leaning toward the United States is portrayed as inevitable by Singapore's leaders because Washington can provide critical public goods in the realm of the war against terrorism that Beijing simply cannot. Yet the two security concerns are

8. Lee Kuan Yew, “How the United States Should Engage Asia in the Post–Cold War Period,” acceptance speech on receiving the Architect of the New Century Award, Nixon Center, Washington, DC; reprinted in *Straits Times*, November 13, 1996.

9. But given that the most likely focus of U.S.-China conflict would be Taiwan—and given the new prime minister's recent stance against a unilateral declaration of independence by Taipei—obvious support from Singapore for U.S. defense of Taiwan will depend on the conditions under which a conflict occurs.

10. Author interview with Singapore official, Ministry of Defense, August 2003.

linked: by tying itself more closely to the United States in the short- to medium-term fight against terrorism, Singapore will also be able to help anchor the Americans in the region as a counterweight against China.

II. Prospects for Enhancing Defence Cooperation between the U.S. and Singapore

Singapore's hopes for enhancing U.S. strategic support are tied to the three key elements of its security strategy. First, in keeping with the view that the U.S. military presence acts as a stabilizing force in the region, Singapore officials hope that Washington will maintain its forward deployments in Northeast Asia. In this regard, there is some apprehension about the impacts on regional confidence of the Bush administration's decision in 2004 to withdraw 15,000 troops from South Korea. As part of its long-standing aim to facilitate a continued U.S. engagement in the region, Singapore also hopes that Washington will be willing to further bilateral military relations, primarily in the realm of defense cooperation. Because of its relative sophistication and significant defense budget, the Singapore armed forces are the only military force in Southeast Asia that can interact with the U.S. military meaningfully. They see the integration of American military equipment as "crucial" and want to invest in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program, which is seen as a possible replacement for the F-16C/D. Singapore would also like more release of classified military technology on its procurements from the United States, however, which would allow it to modify acquired technologies to enhance its independent capabilities.¹¹ This hope reflects Singapore's hardheaded desire to develop its internal balancing and deterrent capabilities through a mix of diversifying sources and indigenous development.

Second, Singapore's firm identification of terrorism and political Islam as key threats to its security significantly deepens its overlapping sphere of security interests with the United States. On this front, Singapore is eager to share intelligence and to cooperate on air and maritime security initiatives. Within the regional context, Singapore wants to leverage on U.S. power and influence to put pressure on neighbors like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to cooperate more fully in counterterrorism operations. To secure this end, Singapore's leaders have emphasized to American policymakers the importance of fighting terrorism in Southeast Asia—a critical world trading route whose security affects that of the United States and its key allies in Australasia.¹² In the war against terrorism, the United States is seen as the indispensable power. But when Singapore policymakers take the long view and focus on the deeper campaign against the "root causes" of terrorism and the development of political Islam, they run up against doubts about U.S. capability. In this regard, they clearly hope that Washington will be able to moderate the adverse international impacts of some of its policies and better target its counterterrorism efforts. Moreover, Singapore's leaders

11. Sheldon Simon, "Security Cooperation Between the U.S. and Its Southeast Asian Partners," IDSS commentary, September 24, 2004; "Singapore: Deconstruction Forges Ahead," *Janes Defence Weekly*, June 27, 2001.

12. Goh, "East Asia After Iraq," p. 3.

appear to be positioning this unusual nation-state as an interlocutor and “special friend” in this mediating effort. Since 2003, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong has taken it upon himself to offer advice to Washington. In speeches to various foreign policy councils, he has strongly supported the Bush administration’s campaign in Iraq, portraying success there as essential to maintaining American credibility. Yet he has also described at length the need to fight terrorism and radicalism with ideas, education, and trade rather than primarily using military force or pushing democracy.¹³ This may be seen as the beginning of a sustained diplomatic effort to bolster Washington’s strength as an ultimate balancer and deterrent against extremist Islamization.

The third major element of Singapore’s expectations of U.S. balancing behavior arises from the China challenge. Here Singapore’s leaders tend to think in traditional balance of power terms based on the assumption that China will some day be strong enough to alter the strategic landscape of the region. As Lee Kuan Yew (2001) put it: “No combination of other East Asian economies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and ASEAN—will be able to balance China . . . therefore the role of America as balancer is crucial if we are to have elbow room.” The expectation is that the United States should act not so much as a counterweight—this would assume that the United States and China are in a position of power parity—but as a large anchor that would, by its continuing predominance, prevent Chinese hegemony and deter Chinese adventurism.¹⁴ At the same time, this indirect security guarantee is expected to take on military, economic, and political dimensions. Singapore clearly hopes for peaceful balancing behavior from the United States—successful deterrence across the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea—which ties primarily into its critical military presence in Northeast Asia. Apart from that, the main worry is economic: how to ensure that China’s growing economic power does not completely dominate Southeast Asia to Singapore’s detriment. Thus Singapore officials see it as crucial to maintain the close economic relationship with the United States, which is Singapore’s most important economic partner in terms of investment, trade, communications, and technology.

Underlying these considerations, though, Singapore policymakers have also begun to stress the importance of the United States undertaking greater political engagement with the region in order to strengthen its balancing capabilities. Particularly with regard to China, but also relevant to the war against terrorism, a discourse of “balance of influence” is now clearly discernible among the Singapore policy elite, a discourse that is shared among some of their ASEAN colleagues, notably in Bangkok. They are convinced that the major powers in the region will be playing a more geopolitical balancing game in the decades to come. Rather than engaging in military confrontation, that is, they will compete mainly in the realm of extended soft power—by stretching their diplomatic, political, and economic clout in order to influence preferences, agendas, and outcomes in the region. With an eye on China’s markedly

13. Goh, “East Asia After Iraq”; Goh Chok Tong, speech to Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, May 6, 2003, reprinted in “Fight Terror with Ideas, Not Just Armies,” *Straits Times*, May 7, 2004; “Why America Bothers to Listen to Singapore,” *Straits Times*, May 8, 2004.

14. “Without the U.S. East Asian regionalism will, over time, be dominated by one player [China]. This will give less breathing room for others in the region.” See Goh, “East Asia After Iraq,” p. 5.

successful political and economic diplomacy in the region over the last two or three years, Singapore policymakers worry that this is a game Washington has not been able to play deftly and thus would stand to lose out to China.¹⁵ This would particularly be the case if Southeast Asian states believe that Washington is no longer particularly interested in the region. In early 2001, the Singapore minister for trade and industry counseled that

“...the United States should also give equal emphasis to the rest of East Asia. Both approaches must be in balance. It should not send the message that the United States considers Asia to be somehow of lower priority now that China is likely to join the World Trade Organization.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that with the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia has become less important in the strategic calculation of the United States. In the minds of many Southeast Asian leaders, the way the United States and the International Monetary Fund responded to the Asian financial crisis confirmed this view. It will be a great mistake for the United States to allow this view to take hold.”¹⁶

Finally, on specific issues of cooperation, we might note that counter-terrorism cooperation between Singapore and the United States has proceeded at a satisfactory level and pace, including cooperation on intelligence, policing, finance and other issues directly related to targeting transnational terrorist networks. The focus now has shifted to other linked issues, with maritime and air transport security being key foci of Singapore’s concerns due to its position as a transport and trans-shipment hub. Here, the recent controversy over the idea of U.S. participation in joint anti-piracy patrols in the Malacca Straits as part of the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) highlighted the divergence of interest between Singapore and its neighbours. Malaysia and Indonesia’s vociferous objections to high profile U.S. involvement in enforcing maritime security in this area mean that Singapore and Washington will have to seek quieter means of multilateral cooperation that will not offend these countries’ sovereignty concerns. PACOM’s recent emphasis on pushing forward the alternative of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) as a wide regional forum to discuss maritime security issues and including regular shore-based and sea exercises is a good means by which to work around these concerns. Additionally, closed door consultations and coordination, monetary support, and the provision of equipment and training are some possible areas to stress.

15. See, for instance, Evelyn Goh, “A Chinese Lesson for the US: How to Charm Southeast Asia,” *Straits Times*, October 31, 2003; Amitav Acharya, “China’s Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia,” *International Herald Tribune*, November 8–9, 2003.

16. George Yeo, “The American Role in the Asian Dream,” *Asiaweek*, April 20, 2001.

III. Conclusion

To sum up, Singapore-U.S. cooperation on transnational security issues is strong and improving. There is a significant degree of overlap in their threat perceptions and security priorities, and both countries perceive and leverage on their mutual usefulness in each other's regional security strategies. The aspects in which cooperation could be enhanced or improved lie mainly in the realm of means (not ends) and style.

In this, Singapore's hopes for a more sensitive and more comprehensive U.S. approach to security issues relates to concerns across the Southeast Asian region. Due to domestic political constraints and to the economic imperative, Southeast Asian states generally hope that the U.S. role in the region will entail more political, diplomatic, and economic elements than the current military and strategic postures and commitments. This role has more to do with sustained economic engagement, greater involvement in regional multilateral institutions, and greater attention to issues that are priorities for regional governments. This means that Washington may have to put as much emphasis on constructive engagement in Southeast Asia as it does on backing up their military hedging strategies. There is an expectation that U.S. leadership in the region must become more oriented toward 'mutual benefit'.

In this sense, Southeast Asian expectations of the United States may boil down to a question primarily of style. In combination with its regional military deployment, Washington is undoubtedly engaging China in political and economic terms as much as Southeast Asia has done. Furthermore, in terms of substance it is clear that Washington has paid the region more sustained attention since September 11, 2001, especially with regard to antiterrorism cooperation across the military, intelligence, and policing realms, as well as in the economic arena. The Bush administration has put troops on the ground to help the Philippines government in its fight against separatists in Mindanao and has elevated Thailand and the Philippines to major non-NATO ally status. Together with the strengthening of security relations with Singapore under the new framework agreement being negotiated, however, these approaches have been bilateral and emphasize the Bush administration's policy of pursuing partnerships of the willing. It has not paid a great deal of attention to multilateral institutions apart from using them to marshal largely declaratory support for the war on terrorism. Meanwhile, the various agencies of the U.S. government continue to emphasize sticking points in relations with Southeast Asian countries related to human rights and democratic development. Stylistically this makes Washington a more difficult partner than Beijing for many Southeast Asian countries.

One key way for Washington to improve its image in Southeast Asia would be to pay more attention to its economic imperative. In a region where economic security is indivisible from national security, this will go some way toward reassuring key countries that Washington values them for reasons other than antiterrorism alone. In this regard, Deputy Secretary of State Bob Zoellick's tour of the region in May 2005 was particularly reassuring for his focus on economic issues. The United States is the largest market and one of the top investors in the region—its critical economic role there is recognized and

welcomed by all. Yet Chinese economic partnerships in the region tend to be given more publicity because they are state-directed. In contrast, U.S. economic relations reside more in the private sector, are much better established, and generate less noise. The Bush administration's Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative has seen it sign an FTA with Singapore and begin negotiations with Thailand. The Philippines and Malaysia now have Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) status and could start FTA negotiations over the next few years. Washington may consider giving more public attention to these positive developments—and to the depth and breadth of U.S.–Southeast Asian economic relations in general—as steps toward improving public diplomacy. Other steps that might help to convince the region of continued U.S. support in this area include establishing normal trade relations with Laos and supporting (or at least not vociferously objecting to) the Asian bond market.

In analyzing Southeast Asian security, the prevailing discourse about “balance of power” is misleading for two key reasons. First, Southeast Asian states have adopted a variety of hedging strategies rather than the simple options of balancing or bandwagoning with either China or the United States. Second, while the current distribution of hard power in favor of the United States will not change for some time, more fluid and challenging is the shifting “balance of influence” in Southeast Asia with the steady development of China’s multilayered relationships with the region. Even so, the United States continues to be the key provider of critical common security goods in the region—leading in counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and anti-trafficking efforts as well as maintaining the military deterrent of the San Francisco system of alliances. Consistent with this role, the region looks to Washington to boost security in three other ways: deepening economic ties to build up internal balancing capabilities of individual countries and to help the region as a whole diversify and prevent over-dependence on China; managing key crisis issues such as Taiwan and the Korean peninsula in concert with other big powers; and supporting efforts to engage with China and the region through multilateral institutions.